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ABSTRACT

The concept of systemic school change as a comprehensive approach to raising academic achievement and preventing school dropouts in Massachusetts is summarized in this report. Following a description of systemic school change, reasons for adopting a systemic change approach are offered. Nine princples of systemic school change are provided, focusing on such matters as academic expectations; developmental needs; pervasiveness of change by grade level or by school or school district; student diversity; and change as a planned process. Common components of system school change initiatives are also presented. A conclusion is that rather than focusing solely on creating alternative and remedial programs for at-risk students, initiatives should include school improvement/restructuring efforts that are school-based, involve all school constituencies, and support the entire student population's learning needs. (34 references) (LMI)

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STRUCTURING SCHOOLS FOR STUDENT SUCCESS —

SYSTEMIC SCHOOL CHANGE:

A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND KEEPING STUDENTS IN SCHOOL

Massachusetts Board of Education

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A NEW AGENDA FOR RAISING ACHIEVEMENT AND KEEPING STUDENTS IN SCHOOL

The results of the Massachusetts 1987 Statewide Basic Skills Test and the 1988 Massachusetts Educational Assessment Program raise important issues for schools that seek to raise students' achievement levels while preventing school dropouts. The Basic Skills Test results indicate that 20% of the students in the Commonwealth, representing just over 30,000 students, failed at least one of the three tests. Failure rates were highest for poor, minority, and non-English-speaking students, as well as students with parents who did not finish high school.

At the same time, approximately 14,000 students enrolled in grades 9-12 dropped out of the Commonwealth's public schools in 1987-1988. This is equivalent to losing almost the entire student body of the state's ten largest schools. If current trends continue, it is projected that 20% of the students who began grade nine in 1987 will not complete high school. The dropout rates for minority students are considerably higher - a projected 36% of Black students, 45% of Hispanic students, and 40% of Native American students will drop out of high school prior to completion. Although the rate for White students was slightly below the state average, nearly seventy-five percent of the total number of school dropouts were White. These figures do not even consider the large numbers of students who are proceeding through school to graduation, yet are disengaged from the learning process.

Given the magnitude of these problems, schools need to rethink traditional notions of remediation and dropout prevention. The 1988 Massachusetts Educational Assessment Program reflects that the kind of curriculum itself, including instructional content and practices, is strongly related to student achievement. Current curriculum and instructional methods do not routinely develop higher order thinking skills and do not help all students develop broad concepts and evaluate information. Merely increasing the number of remediation programs and resource rooms will not address the factors that cause significant numbers of students to achieve at low levels.

Given the magnitude of these problems, schools need to rethink traditional notions of remediation and dropout prevention.

There is a similar need to address larger systemic changes in regard to dropout prevention. Current research cites an increasing recognition that small alternative programs, while vital for many students and an important influence upon a

1
Systemic Change

larger school, will only have a limited impact within a school that is not also engaged in a similar process of improvement. Creating alternative programs does not necessarily get to the causes of high dropout, suspension, absence, and nonpromotion rates.

Today, our schools have the enormous burden of preparing students to be thoughtful, productive, and responsible citizens in a democratic society. This means successfully keeping students in school through high school graduation, and engaging them in learning experiences that raise academic achievement, increase their cognitive skills, and address their individual social and emotional needs. To accomplish this, in many cases, systemic, school-based changes are required to foster learning environments that meet the emotional, social, physical and intellectual needs of all students. This paper summarizes the concept of systemic school change as a comprehensive approach to raising academic achievement and preventing school dropouts.

Systemic, school-based changes are required to foster learning environments that meet the emotional, social, physical and intellectual needs of all students.

WHAT IS SYSTEMIC SCHOOL CHANGE?

"...[there need to be] fundamental changes in the way schools are financed, organized, and administered as well as the way teaching is delivered so that even the most marginal students can succeed."[1]

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Case Study

The principal and the entire staff, were alarmed by the end-of-year statistics they faced - high suspension rates, low attendance and high failure rates by a significant percentage of the student population, and an increasing number of students considered for retention in grade. They decided to do something about it. A team was formed - that included administrators, staff, parents, and students - to study and make recommendations concerning all areas of the school. After three months of deliberation, a long-range plan of change was developed. A mission statement was written, emphasizing the expectation that all students can learn and achieve at high levels. A Steering Committee was formed, representing all school constituencies, in which major decisions of the school were discussed and made. The school was broken down into clusters, with teacher and counselor teams assigned to each cluster. Each team receives common planning time and the autonomy to shape the curriculum and schedule in the way they felt would best facilitate learning.

Teacher-advisor and mentor programs were begun to increase adult contact with students and to provide forums for students to discuss their concerns. Teacher study groups, peer supervision, and visits to other schools were initiated to encourage teacher sharing and exploration of innovative instructional strategies. Efforts have also been made to reduce the fragmentation of services delivered to students. These changes have included eliminating most pull-out specialized services, teaming special education and Chapter I teachers with regular education teachers to provide these same services within the regular education classroom, and further integrating bilingual education students into regular education classes. Parent workshops have been conducted to help parents learn how to better support their children's education and to act as advocates on behalf of their children. And community agencies were included on a Student Support Team that provides case management services to individual students. The result: a wholesale change in the school's climate and in students' performance.

This case study, representing a synthesis of initiatives in several districts, is but one example of systemic school change. "Systemic school change" is one of several names - "school restructuring" and "school-based change" being two others - for school improvement on a district and/or school building-wide level.

> **Systemic school change involves fundamental changes in traditional school organization, governance, policies, programs, and practices. The goals of systemic change are to raise academic achievement, improve students' social-emotional growth and development, enhance the school climate, and expand roles of staff.**

How staff work together, how decisions are made, how teaching is structured, how a school operates, and who is invited into the school building are all questions that have an important impact upon a school's climate and how a student learns and feels about him or herself.

WHY ADOPT A SYSTEMIC CHANGE APPROACH TO IMPROVING SCHOOLS?

1. We need to be more responsive to the needs of more students.

Many schools today are faced with an increasing number of students who inappropriately act out their frustrations, who are failing academically, who are bored or alienated from the school experience, or are beset with numerous familial and societal problems. High suspension, retention, academic failure, and dropout rates in many schools indicate that these schools as they are presently structured may not be serving the needs of a significant percentage of their students. Alternative education programs, while serving a vital role, usually serve only smaller numbers of students - a fraction of those in need of a more supportive environment. Remedial pull-out programs and resource rooms have not had sustained success in closing the achievement gap between low- and high-achieving students.

Until school-wide policies, practices, and programs are changed to be responsive to the needs of all students, these programs will always be oversubscribed. Systemic school changes throughout an entire school building can serve to address the needs of more students and reduce the number of students requiring alternative and remedial programs.

2. Systemic change more directly addresses the root causes of low achievement, school failure, and high dropout rates.

Sometimes low-achieving students are kept back in grade or placed in remedial pull-out programs without examining how the curriculum and instruction could have been better tailored to meet the learning styles and strengths of particular students. High rates of student failure and nonpromotions can indicate that student learning needs are not being met by the regular instructional program. Similarly, sometimes a "troublesome" student is transferred to a more supportive alternative program without considering how a school or classroom could have better met the needs of that particular student. Student apathy can be reflective of students not feeling a sense of belonging and ownership within a school. Student misbehavior, while admittedly inappropriate, is sending a signal that the student's needs are not being met within the system.

High rates of student failure and nonpromotions can indicate that student learning needs are not being met by the regular instructional program.

Low-achieving and at-risk students are one barometer of a school's health. One way to have a lasting impact upon academic achievement, suspension, nonpromotion, and dropout rates is to institute changes at a district and building level that enhance the success of all students. Systemic school change initiatives seek to build curriculum and deliver instruction in a manner that raises academic achievement and higher order cognitive skills for all students.

3. Systemic change benefits everyone, and can raise the level of commitment and participation by all constituencies within a school community.

Systemic school change provides the opportunity to structure a school in such a way as to best support an optimal teaching and learning environment.

Systemic school change provides the opportunity to structure a school in such a way as to best support an optimal teaching and learning environment. All students benefit by having a more supportive school climate, program diversity, and increased adult contact. Teachers have increased decision-making control over the curriculum and their classrooms. Team structures foster teacher collegiality and provide a mechanism to address concerns about individual students. Administrators gain more input regarding school policies and are able to place more focus upon their role as an instructional leader and change agent of the school. Guidance counselors can adopt a more coordinated approach to servicing individual students by working with teacher teams. Everyone in the school benefits by having a school structure that is responsive to the needs of all. Systemic change is a collaborative effort, and oftentimes results in uniting a school behind common principles and beliefs.

4. Systemic changes are more successful in the long run.

Current research questions the effectiveness of pull-out or alternative programs which deal with students as "problem students," or when they exist within a school that is not engaged in a process of change and improvement. A low-achieving or at-risk student enrolled in one of these programs, yet still subject to rigid promotion and testing policies or low teacher expectations, will still have a high chance of failing academically or of dropping out of school. Systemic school changes that improve the learning environment, and which include the replication of successful alternative program practices throughout a school building, build more successful schools.

5. Systemic change is more cost-effective.

Too often, dropout prevention and remedial initiatives are created as add- on or alternative programs and rely upon "soft" money. Because they have outside sources of funding and are not part of the fabric of the school, these programs are usually the first to go when the source of funds ends. Additionally, these programs are substantially more costly than regular education programs because they are add-on programs. On the other hand, systemic change initiatives focus upon assessing the resources that are available, and reorganizing and strengthening them to improve the learning and teaching environment. This process is, in the long run, more cost- effective.

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PRINCIPLES OF SYSTEMIC SCHOOL CHANGE

Following are nine principles of systemic school change:

1. Systemic change must focus upon the creation of policies and practices that promote high expectations for all students, teaching practices and programs which support the learning needs of the entire student population and the diverse skills of staff, and services which provide individual and group support to those students who need it. Clearly communicated high expectations for all students results in greater academic achievement and can help students overcome many of the obstacles to learning which individual circumstances may have produced. Teaching strategies need to be based upon how children learn, and be interactive in nature. This climate of high expectations and developmental instruction creates a reinforcing message to students: You are capable, you must work hard, and we will support you. And you will succeed.

2. Any change must take into consideration the developmental needs of the student population and the need to raise students' self-esteem. As students grow, they pass through certain developmental stages, usually associated with certain age spans. These stages are identified with specific emotional, social, intellectual, and physical needs. Schools need to consider the "whole child," and attend to students' emotional, social and physical development and the raising of self-esteem, as well as enhancing students' academic growth.

3. Systemic change must have a goal of implementing new initiatives throughout a school or district or across a grade span in order to impact upon all students. Implementing programs and services that affect only a few does not necessarily improve the learning for all students. Causes of student disengagement and academic failure will only be addressed if school-wide initiatives are implemented. Certainly, this approach does not discount piloting new programs or providing special services to target groups of students, but they should be components of a whole school approach.

Causes of student disengagement and academic failure will only be addressed if school-wide initiatives are implemented.

4. Systemic change has a goal of empowering all school constituencies, and therefore must be inclusive. A fundamental precept of systemic change is that the system works better when everyone - administrators, staff, parents, students and community representatives - is involved in a process of

shared decision-making. This could mean a permanent shift in how a school is governed and how it operates. Inclusion ensures meaningful input, a sound plan, and ownership of impending changes.

5. Systemic change must take into consideration the diversity of a school's student population. The goal of systemic change is to create a school environment that promotes the success of all students. A school with a diverse student population should have diverse programs. School staff need to reflect students' diversity, and understand and be sensitive to the cultural and economic background of all of a school's students in order to create the best possible programming.

6. Systemic change must be school-based. Lasting change will not occur if it is imposed upon a school. Each school, its principal, its staff, and its student population is unique. The people who best understand these unique factors should be those who are responsible for planning and undertaking change initiatives. Within any school, the principal has a unique role of initiating, supporting, and coordinating the change process.

7. Any change initiative must have the support, assistance, and ongoing involvement of the superintendent, school committee, and administrator and teacher unions. These constituencies can ensure that an initiative will have long-term support, and can provide coordination and resources to ensure an initiative's successful implementation.

8. Systemic change initiatives must include a community approach to addressing the needs of at-risk students. Given the scope of student needs and the home and neighborhood factors that contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school, an increased public awareness must be developed that low levels of academic achievement and high dropout rates are a community-wide dilemma. Therefore, schools need to extend beyond the school walls and forge partnerships with community agencies, businesses, higher education institutions, and municipalities in order to increase the resources and capacity available to better serve all students.

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9. Systemic change must be a planned process. Change does not happen overnight. It cannot be prescribed and implemented within the course of a week's or even a month's time. Lasting change evolves from a continuing process of team-building, assessment, planning, piloting new approaches, and evaluation and replication.

COMPONENTS OF SYSTEMIC SCHOOL CHANGE

Certainly, within any school, systemic change initiatives take different shapes and forms. However, following are fifteen common components of systemic school change initiatives.

1. CREATING A MISSION STATEMENT

Too often, students and staff within a school have disparate views as to the purpose of schooling. This lack of clarity can sometimes lead to lowered expectations, a lack of purpose, and a fragmented school community. Schools are successful when everyone involved in them has a common understanding of the school's philosophy. In successful schools, everyone works together on a common agenda to reach agreed upon goals. To this end, the creation of a short mission statement, which clearly articulates the school's purpose, helps to bring a sense of community and vision to a school. Representatives from all school constituencies take part in the creation of this mission statement; in fact, the process and ensuing discussion about the purpose of school and schooling becomes just as vital in building unity as does the finished product.

The more people are included within the decision-making governance of a school, the more people have a sense of belonging and participation in the school.

Every mission statement varies according to the unique populations within each school. However, mission statements that have a positive impact include an expectation that all children can learn and achieve at high levels, while recognizing the rich diversity in student backgrounds and learning styles. In this way, a mission statement can set a tone of high expectations for both teachers and students, a focus on developing higher order thinking skills, and the provision of a high degree of support to help students reach their goals. A strong mission statement then becomes a building block to restructure a school.

2. SHARED DECISION-MAKING

The more people are included within the decision-making governance of a school, the more people have a sense of belonging and participation in the school. Students take more pride in a school they feel they have "built," parents become more involved in a school within which they have a say in their child's education, and staff are more creative and committed in a school within which they are able to govern the learning environment. Inclusivity requires different forms of school governance than the traditional hierarchical structure of many

schools. Committees and task forces assume more of a key function of developing policies and recommendations for school change. Parents and students, as well as staff, are given decision-making input into many areas of school governance such as curriculum, hiring of staff, resource allocation, programmatic changes, and school rules and policies. Teacher teams are given control over most areas of instruction. Principals take on more of a role of coordinator and facilitator, and often find that, rather than giving up authority, more is gained as everyone is more committed to the decisions that are made.

3. INCLUSIVE SCHOOL CLIMATE

A school's climate greatly determines how students feel about being in school, and how students feel about themselves. Students need to feel they are an integral part of a school. Consequently, a conscious effort needs to be made to support and model the cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of all students through the composition of the staff, the nature and content of the curriculum, who is represented in curriculum materials, how people are treated, and the nature of symbols and artwork throughout the school's halls and corridors. Respect, support, cooperation, and conflict resolution are all important concepts in building a positive school climate.

4. SUPPORTIVE AND FLEXIBLE SCHOOL POLICIES

A school's policies around such issues as school rules, promotion and graduation requirements, discipline, attendance, grouping patterns of students, and health issues greatly influence a school's climate and the message students receive about their acceptance within the school. Suspensions may give a message of rejection to students who already feel a school does not care about them; grade retentions may only reinforce a sense of failure rather than promote achievement and learning; rigid graduation policies may rule out the possibility of alternative learning experiences; academic punishment may arbitrarily penalize a student who is trying hard to succeed, but still has attendance problems; tracking practices can doom some students to learning less while also being stigmatized for being a low-level student; and punitive procedures for students who abuse drugs or alcohol, are pregnant, or are HIV positive may exacerbate these problems and result in further school failure.

Grade retentions may only reinforce a sense of failure rather than promote achievement and learning.

School policies, beyond providing for the safe and orderly functioning of a school, should help students solve problems and promote a positive and inclusive school climate. Policies should be developed by representatives of all school constituencies, including the school committee, to ensure community ownership of these policies. These policies should be constructed to provide support to students who are experiencing difficulties, not solely to penalize them.

Mediation and community meetings may be a better substitute than suspension; accelerated learning or peer coaching, rather than grade retention, may help a student succeed; flexible avenues to meeting graduation requirements may help a student build upon his/her learning strengths; counseling, home visits, and contracting may be better solutions for a chronic nonattender than academic punishment; cooperative and peer-group learning may be better options for working with students of varying academic levels than segregating them through tracking practices; and protocols which emphasize treatment and prevention options for students with health problems may address the causes of their behaviors rather than suspending or excluding them from school.

5. CLUSTERING AND PROGRAM DIVERSITY

Clustering allows students to develop more meaningful relationships with both their peers and their teachers, while fostering a sense of school community.

A large school building and student population can prevent the development of a real sense of community in which meaningful relationships exist between students and teachers. A student can easily go unnoticed despite that student's need for attention, support, and even services. Clustering, on the other hand, allows students to develop more meaningful relationships with both their peers and their teachers, while fostering a sense of school community. Clustering provides an opportunity to develop a host of diverse programs housed within one school building. While normally associated with secondary school programs, clustering can also be an effective means of breaking down large elementary schools into smaller units to facilitate teaming of staff and the building of a community identity.

Clustering divides the entire student population of a school into groupings of students. Each cluster, usually containing between 75 and 300 students, is housed within a defined geographical area of the school. Clusters may be programmatically similar to each other, or they may be designed to respond to a need for program diversity by taking on unique programmatic and instructional identities. Student assignment to

clusters is designed to ensure a heterogenous cross-section of the student body, rather than by ability grouping. If clusters are programmatically diverse, assignment is usually by student interest. Students attend their core academic classes within the cluster, but may travel outside the cluster for electives, physical education, art, music, and other classes.

6. TEAMING OF STAFF

In many secondary schools, staff rarely have opportunities to work collegially with each other. In fact, in many ways the organization and scheduling of a school precludes this. Within a cluster, however, a team of teachers (usually a math, English, science, and social studies teacher) is assigned to each cluster. Students rotate among these teachers for their core academic classes. Many times, guidance counselors are assigned by clusters as well. Sometimes, the electives, art, music, and physical education teachers form clusters to coordinate their own activities and to meet periodically with each academic cluster team.

Staff rarely have opportunities to work collegially with each other. In fact, in many ways the organization and scheduling of a school precludes this.

Teams are given common planning time in order to coordinate curriculum, monitor student progress, plan cluster activities, and conduct parent conferences. Usually, each cluster selects a team leader who plans agendas for team meetings and serves as a liaison with the administration. Teams are also given decision-making control over curriculum, scheduling, activities, cluster rules, parent involvement, and other areas that concern the progress of their students.

In elementary schools, these teams may take the form of special education, Chapter I, and/or remedial teachers teaming with the regular education teacher to integrate specialized services into the mainstream curriculum and classroom. Teams of similiar grade teachers may also form Teacher Support Teams who meet weekly with specialists or counselors to gain support around how to approach the learning and behavior problems of individual students, and to consider structural or organizational changes which might facilitate student achievement or an improved learning environment.

There are several advantages to teaming: 1) a consistent team of teachers works with the same group of students, allowing students and teachers to get to know each other better; 2) teachers are given the opportunity to work collegially as a team, reducing the isolation many teachers face; 3) teams have

the opportunity to develop a more integrated curriculum and program for their cluster; 4) the fragmentation of the school day can be reduced; and 5) teachers are empowered by gaining more decision-making control over curriculum, student progress, parent contact, and cluster activities.

7. GROUPING OF STUDENTS

In most schools, students are grouped homogeneously, with the rationale of easing the task of teaching to a wide diversity of achievement levels while allowing students to progress along with students of similar ability levels. However, homogeneous grouping of students often results in an ever widening knowledge gap between low-, middle-, and high-ability groups. Students in low-ability groups are often exposed to a slower pace of instruction, with an emphasis upon lower order cognitive skills; while students in high-ability groups tend to receive faster paced instruction, with an emphasis upon higher order cognitive skills and more challenging instruction.

On the other hand, heterogenous grouping of students, coupled with an emphasis upon interactive and cooperative group learning, can propell all students to learn at high levels, regardless of current achievement level. Heterogeneous grouping allows a student to work with a diversity of other students, and helps break down social and class barriers to peer groups and friendships. Heterogeneous grouping encourages teachers to set high expectations for all students, and provides a better opportunity for all students to receive high quality instruction.

Cross-age, multi-grade grouping of students is successful in breaking down social labelling of ability, while providing increased opportunities to expose students to a diversity of peer role models.

Cross-age, multi-grade grouping of students is also successful in breaking down social labelling of ability, while providing increased opportunities to expose students to a diversity of peer role models. Student grouping arrangements should be rearranged periodically to allow students to work with a multitude of other students.

Reducing class size and the fragmentation of services are also important goals that can be addressed through grouping students. Rather than pulling students out of class for specialized services, Chapter I, special education, and remedial services can be integrated into the regular education classroom. This allows teachers to lower teacher-student ratios through a team-teaching approach, and provides teams with the flexibility to experiment with cooperative group learning and other student-centered, interactive instructional strategies.

8. FLEXIBLE OR BLOCK SCHEDULING

In secondary schools, the traditional seven-period-a-day schedule can be a hindrance to learning. More or less time may be needed for some subjects, or it may make more sense to schedule subjects for longer periods of time and only three times a week. As well, rigid schedules often preclude taking advantage of the rich resources within a community that are outside of the school walls (e.g., field trips, community service and apprenticeship experiences).

In elementary schools, the problem is somewhat different. While not subject to a seven-period-a day schedule, many times the schedule is just as fragmented due to the scheduling of students into specialized classes. Such fragmentation reduces the total amount of instructional time students receive, and may make it difficult for teachers to fully utilize longer blocks of learning time that are necessary for a truly interdisciplinary approach to the curriculum.

Flexible scheduling provides each teacher team with a vehicle to manipulate the schedule of a school day and week to best suit the curriculum and learning needs of students. Usually, an uninterrupted block of time is scheduled each day for team courses and activities. Students are scheduled into these classes, which allows each teacher team to schedule daily common planning time. This block of time is free of a rigid schedule and can be organized into longer and shorter blocks of time, and even changed to accommodate field trips, guest speakers, cluster activities, and community learning experiences. All out-of-class specialized services and classes are scheduled into a block of time for the remainder of each school day. Thus, the fragmentation of the school day can be reduced, and the amount of direct instructional time increased.

Through the use of flexible scheduling, the fragmentation of the school day can be reduced, and the amount of direct instructional time increased.

9. INTERDISCIPLINARY CURRICULUM

The increasing diversity of students today requires a more varied and flexible curriculum which fits their needs. Learning seven different and unrelated subjects each day is not necessarily the best way to learn. The amount of information a student is able to retain and master, as well as a student's ability to continually shift gears and give full attention to a different subject matter every forty-five minutes, is of concern. Teaming allows teachers to coordinate the curriculum to create interdisciplinary units that focus upon the same theme across

disciplines. This allows more attention to be paid to the quality and depth of instruction of essential concepts and themes rather than on the quantity of subjects taken. English, social studies, and art could all be taught under the umbrella of a humanities course, for example. As well, the curriculum content is designed so that the content integrates and is sensitive to a student's background and culture, and is developmentally appropriate to age and maturation levels of students. To this extent, the rich resources within a community are used to broaden the scope of the curriculum.

10. INNOVATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Only an estimated twenty-five percent of students learn best from traditional methods of instruction that are teacher-centered - the lecture and textbook approach. The other estimated seventy-five percent of students learn best through other modes of learning - visual, experiential, expressive, and demonstrative. Each student has learning strengths and weaknesses. Uniformity of instructional strategies will invariably benefit some students while depriving others. A diverse student body calls for diverse instructional strategies.

Uniformity of instructional strategies will invariably benefit some students while depriving others.

Cooperative learning, peer tutoring, learning centers, project-based learning, and teacher-as-coach are increasingly being seen as successful strategies that encourage students to become active rather than passive learners, and that provide opportunities for students of all ability groupings to interact. The teacher then has increased flexibility to become a facilitator rather than the sole purveyor of knowledge. An increased emphasis is placed upon the teaching of higher order thinking skills - problem solving, reasoning, logic, analysis, synthesis, and experimentation. The acquisition of these skills takes prominence over the mastery of facts, and is viewed as the primary vehicle by which students learn basic skills.

11. GRADING AND ASSESSMENT OF STUDENT PROGRESS

Schools have long sought ways to adequately measure student progress. Standardized tests have been found to measure only a narrow range of skills, and some are biased against certain groupings of students. Grading practices are not always a good measure of continuous progress, mastery of essential concepts and themes, or acquisition of higher order cognitive skills.

On the other hand, continuous, curriculum-based assessment, using a variety of instruments, can take the place of routine standardized tests. Frequent assessment of students' work assists teachers in determining student learning styles, strengths, weaknesses, and grasp of materials. Assessment results should drive the type of instruction delivered to students. A portfolio and exhibition approach to assessing mastery of material takes the place of traditional true-false and multiple choice tests, and should focus more upon the understanding of concepts rather than memorization of facts. Grading may be eliminated or based upon continuous progress.

12. A FOCUS ON STUDENT SUPPORT

Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult. Students need to feel that there is someone within school whom they know, to whom they can turn, and who will act as an advocate for them. As well, the physical, social, and emotional developmental needs of students are just as important as a student's academic and intellectual growth. Students' abilities to learn are greatly influenced by their nutrition, self-esteem, need for interaction, and state of mind.

Possibly the most critical element to success within school is a student developing a close and nurturing relationship with at least one caring adult.

A "whole child" approach acknowledges the need for schools to address all areas of a student's development. Consequently, many schools have reorganized their guidance and counseling and academic programs. Case management models include teams of school and community agency staff to whom any student with a problem can be referred; the team is then responsible for assessing the student and delivering an individual service plan. Mentor, teacher-advisor, and life issues programs increase the number of supportive adults available for students, while providing students with forums to discuss issues important to them. Utilization of community human service agencies increases the available counseling and support services within a school.

Frequent incentives and rewards provide students with recognition for progress and achievement in all areas of a student's development. Rewards take into account that students who improve their attendance from 30% to 60% have accomplished something important, just as have those students who have gained the honor roll for the third consecutive time.

13. PARENTS AS ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS

School staff are aware of the importance of having parents and guardians at home who actively support a student's education. Yet, all too often parents are not active participants within a school. Despite the efforts of school staff, many parents feel as though they are unwelcome within their child's school, or that they do not have any say in their child's education. Still others are unaware of how they could better support their child in school.

Schools need to actively promote parent involvement since parent attitudes and support greatly affect a student's self-esteem and academic achievement. Parents should have a meaningful role in making school decisions. Parents need to feel that a school is accessible and welcoming of their presence. This includes having an open-door policy, an understanding that parents have a wealth of information about their child, an awareness of cultural backgrounds, and an availability of translators for linguistic minority parents.

Parents should be utilized as valuable resources who can enrich the curriculum and activities of a school. Parents need information and training on how to best support their child's education at home, and should be encouraged to set high expectations for their children to achieve. And many times, parents need support and services themselves.

14. CREATIVE STAFF DEVELOPMENT

A person's commitment to creativity is directly related to that person's own ability to grow and feel good about him or herself. Too often, staff development sessions are one-shot sessions, with the topic determined by someone other than those receiving it, the date and location dictated to staff, and no follow-up planned. Staff need multiple opportunities for staff development over which they have control about topic, time, frequency, and replication within the classroom.

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Staff development needs to be an organic and evolving process that helps staff to identify and define problems and grapple with solutions. Peer observation, study groups, visitations, common team planning time, and other staff-generated learning opportunities can recycle and revitalize staff energy and be a vehicle by which to drive and sustain a change initiative. A few districts have initiated "teacher academies" in which

teachers, on a rotating basis, are granted seven to ten-week mini-sabbaticals and engage in a structured program of seminars, observation, and research to revitalize their skills.

15. COMMUNITY COLLABORATION

Given the scope of a school's responsibility to attend to the needs of the "whole child," it is impossible for a school to have all of the resources to succeed, nor is it even the sole responsibility of the school to ensure student success. Schools increasingly need to reach beyond the school walls and out into the community to access services and programs. This entails new ways of organizations working together.

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Every community, big and small, has a wealth of resources to offer to a school. Businesses can provide mentor, work-study, apprenticeship, career awareness and education, and cooperative education programs; higher education institutions can provide staff development, college students as tutors, and innovative learning programs; community agencies can provide supportive services to students and their families; and municipalities can provide recreational and youth corps activities and programs.

CONCLUSION

The scope and numbers of low-achieving students and school dropouts demand that educators develop new approaches to raising academic achievement and keeping students in school.

The scope and numbers of low-achieving students and school dropouts demand that educators develop new approaches to raising academic achievement and keeping students in school. Rather than solely focusing upon the creation of alternative and remedial programs for low-achieving and at-risk students, these initiatives need to include school improvement and restructuring efforts. They must be school-based, involve all school constituencies, and be geared towards the creation of school-wide structures, policies, programs, and practices which support the learning needs of the entire student population.

Planning and team-building are essential ingredients of a change strategy. New forms of school governance, positive school policies, program diversity, innovative instruction, meaningful parent involvement, and active community collaboration are all parts of a formula for success. Through a process of systemic school change, a school can both support low-achieving students to succeed, and reduce the future number of at-risk students.

FOOTNOTE

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